



Viivi Iitiä

THE GLASS CLIFF PHENOMENON

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1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis aims to conduct a narrative literature review to analyze the current understanding of the contexts where glass cliffs occur, meaning situations where women or other minorities are preferentially selected for leadership positions related to high risk and precariousness. By painting a collective picture of the existing research on the phenomenon, the thesis aspires to illustrate how the phenomenon relates to the underrepresentation of women in top leadership positions. In addition, the practical consequences of the phenomenon and suggestions for dealing with the issue are discussed.

1.1 Background; women climbing the corporate ladder

Unarguably women have faced discrimination and subordination in the organizational life, struggling against sexism and stereotypes to have the same starting point and treatment as their clearly advantaged male colleagues (Adler, 1993; Haile, Emmanuel, & Dzathor, 2016; Nieva & Gutek, 1980). Alarming enough, related research has suggested that women are, for example, placed under more scrutiny and evaluated less favorably than men even in comparable roles (Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992). Women also have to struggle with biased perceptions of leadership when both workers tend to prefer male supervisors (Simon & Landis, 1989) and managers (male ones in particular) remain unconvinced of women's leadership abilities (Bowen, Swim, & Jacobs, 2000; Sczesny, 2003). Research and literature focusing on exposing and ungrounding these practices aim to contribute towards a more gender equal organization practices (Hoyt, 2013, p.374; Ryan, Haslam, Morgenroth, Rink, Stoker, & Peters, 2016). For example, the research in question has provided us with the now widely established concept of the glass ceiling (originally coined by Hymowitz and Schellhardt in their Wall Street Journal report in 1986) that is used to refer to seemingly invisible barriers faced by women attempting to reach senior ranks and the subsequent term of glass escalator that portrays the ways in which (white heterosexual) men get to take the fast track to the top (Williams, 1992).

While initially scholars debated whether women actually could lead in the first place, according to Crystal Hoyt (2013, p.350) this "is now a moot point." She refers to cases

of successful female leaders as examples of women breaking the glass ceiling and states that the current issue in the field is no longer related to a woman's ability to lead, but differences in effectiveness and leadership styles between genders and the remaining underrepresentation of women in top positions. The latter issue is also well illustrated in an article published in the New York Times stating there were fewer women all together serving as chief executives of Standard & Poor's 1500 index companies than there were men chief executives named John (Wolfers, 2015). At the same time, studies focusing on leadership and gender have indicated that women indeed make good managers (Bass & Avolio, 1994), accompanied with reports stating that women add value to a company's higher management and competitiveness (Grant Thornton International Business Report 2013). Going forward, this presents a reason to call into question any existing barriers and attitudes in the present that normalize discriminative practices and possibly restrain organizations from fully accessing valuable resources that women and minority groups can bring to the table.

It is undeniably evident that the glass ceiling has started to crack, and women are attaining senior positions in rising numbers. For example, according to the Central Chamber of Commerce of Finland, by 2020 the number of women on listed company boards is higher than ever with every fourth company having equal presentation of both women and men. At the same time, we are reminded that in the same sample only 8% of chief executive officers are women. In a more international context, the European Commission published a report on equality between women and men in the European Union in 2019 that includes a sheet showing a steady statistical increase from 11,9% to 26,7% of women on the boards of large, listed companies between 2010 and 2018. Still, another chart presented in the report illustrates well the fact that the fight for gender equality in the top levels of organizations is far but over; the gender balance zone will be reached only at 40%.

The increasing number of women breaking through the glass ceiling and the yet prevailing underrepresentation of women in the very top positions has inspired research to change perspectives and examine what happens to the women who do manage to reach the very top (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010; Ryan, Haslam & Postmes, 2007). This research is also the origin of the glass cliff phenomenon, stating that women are preferred to top leadership positions in times of crisis (Ryan & Haslam,

2005; Ryan & Haslam, 2007). Though not explicit or exhaustive, the research around the glass cliff has clearly pointed out the significant implications different biased practices still continue to have for women (and other discriminated groups) in organizational life (Cook & Glass, 2014b; Ellemers, Rink, Derks & Ryan, 2012; Peterson, 2014; Ryan, Haslam, Hersby & Bongiorno, 2011), and therefore the strain of studies continues to have momentous importance.

1.2 Presenting the topic: Discovering the glass cliff

With women attaining senior positions, their abilities and effectiveness as leaders in comparison to men has been questioned. This can also be seen as the baseline on Judge's article "Women on board: Help or hindrance?" featured in the Times (2003), where she argues that 100 FTSE companies with women on their boards were performing more poorly than companies with all male boards. The data she presents as support states that six of the ten companies with the highest percentage of women on their boards were underperforming in relation to the FTSE 100 listed companies. She argues that the poor performance is indeed due to the women attaining senior positions and concludes that women have "wreaked havoc on companies' performance and share prices."

Judge's conclusion that women leaders effect company performance negatively was soon called into question with an archival study of the same data used in her article, showing that in a declining market women's appointments were associated with consistent previous bad company performance (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Ryan and Haslam contest the causality presented by Judge and instead suggest that poor company performance can lead to the appointment of women to the board. This way when women are preferentially selected for more risky leadership positions, Ryan and Haslam suggest that women may find themselves standing on a glass cliff.

Research surrounding the glass cliff phenomenon can be seen as a core part of the attempt to understand women as leaders by examining the types of positions they tend to take once they have broken the glass ceiling (Ryan et al., 2007). Since its initial appearance, research has found evidence of the glass cliff across domains and methodologies, but at the same time some contradicting results have been uncovered.

Glass cliffs are clearly not unequivocal and not evident in all situations. At the same time, given the still thriving and consistent underrepresentation of women in the top echelons of organizational life and the unavoidable evidence of significant implications precarious appointments have, understanding the phenomenon holds importance in building truly equal opportunities.

1.3 Research questions & objectives of the thesis

Overall, there has been tremendous progress with perceptions of women as leaders. Carlson, Kacmar and Whitten (2006) explore the change in attitudes about women executives in their article published in the Harvard Business Review and present positive findings: in 2005 an average of 88% of men respondents agreed that their attitude towards women in management is favorable, compared to the disappointing average of 35% in 1965. Still, when asked whether “the business community will ever wholly accept female executives” and if “a woman has to be exceptional to succeed in business today” the authors uncovered significant differences between men and women’s responses. Men’s perceptions about these barriers women might still face seemed to be “overly rosy”. While 69,4% of the women remain unconvinced that they can succeed without being exceptional, only 31,7% of the male respondents believed this is the case for women. When taking in consideration women’s much less optimistic responses and their undeniable underrepresentation at the top, the authors argue that executive men (unintentionally or not) might not be living up to their words.

The glass cliff research has a role to play when it comes to uncovering these hidden issues that still prevail by providing academic evidence that in turn serves a purpose in ungrounding any “overly rosy” beliefs that might imply that the existence of these issues can be denied and ignored. This thesis will examine the scholarship around the glass cliff in more detail to outline a comprehensive picture of the current understanding of the phenomenon and how it relates to underrepresentation of women in top positions. By doing this, the thesis aims to contribute to the understanding of the barriers women and other minorities still have to fight against in organizational life and bring forward the role academic research can have not only in identifying prevailing issues but in building a more equal organizational practice.

Taking into account the contradictory findings and the evident context dependent nature of the phenomenon, it is obvious that glass cliffs are not always easily determined. What is clear at this point, is that the phenomenon is complex yet robust, placing significant importance on understanding the situational factors and conditions that do or do not contribute to the manifestation of the glass cliff phenomenon in different situations (Ryan et al., 2016). We also cannot ignore the negative consequences precarious positions have for glass cliff leaders. In order to prevent non-traditional leaders being disproportionately exposed to these negative implications, it seems rather significant that academia does what it can by providing evidence to help shape perceptions of existing barriers and their causes. After all a problem cannot be solved unless its existence is accepted in the first place (Ryan et al., 2007).

The research questions of this thesis are the following:

1. What factors have been identified to underlie the manifestation of glass cliffs?
2. What practical implications precarious appointments have for glass cliff leaders' careers?

1.4 Method and structure of the thesis

This thesis uses the principles of a narrative literature review, and by summarizing the previous research done on the glass cliff phenomenon it aspires to paint a cohesive picture of the explanations given to their occurrence, the implications they have and what can be done to avoid women and/or minorities being overrepresented in precarious positions. The aim of a narrative review is to build a vast picture of the research topic or to describe its history and development (Salminen, 2011, p.6-8)

The references of this thesis were selected mainly from the databases that the University of Oulu grants access to, more specifically Ebsco Databases, ProQuest

Databases, Scopus and Oula Finna's collections. In addition, Google Scholar was used, and some references were selected based on their mention in papers that were previously seen as relevant to the topic. The most important search words used were "glass cliff" and "feminist organization studies." To monitor the reliability of the used references, whether the papers were peer reviewed or not was considered. Along the same lines, the amount of citations made to the particular paper was taken into account. Apart from a few differences, most of the papers used in this thesis were written in English.

In the first chapter the background description will help the reader to better understand the vast context and meaning of the phenomenon. The introduction serves a purpose in painting a picture of the research problem, study design and the purposes of the thesis. The second chapter focuses on the theoretical background the topic is tied to in order to deepen the academic contextual setting for the reader. The third chapter addresses the phenomenon itself and the research around it. In the fourth chapter the research questions are answered with concluding comments.

2 FEMINIST ORGANIZATION STUDIES AS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Looking back on the history of leadership studies, the scholarship has been dominated by studies of men, conducted by men (Mills & Tancred, 1992). Historically speaking, gender neutrality for a long time meant completely ignoring the aspect's impacts on organizational theorizing. According to Hoyt (2013, p. 349), it was not until the 1970s when the substantial number of women breaking the glass ceiling inspired academics to observe women as leaders more closely. The women in leadership strain of studies is a great example of making gender a visible factor in academic scholarship, an aspect that rises from feminist theorizing. This chapter briefly discusses how feminism contributes to organizational studies and how it relates to the women in leadership research, from where the glass cliff phenomenon rises.

2.1 Feminist theorizing in organization studies

With an aim to uncover and question any gender-based discrimination and a desire to make active changes to these injustices, feminism is strongly characterized as critical and political (Tienari, 2015). It is a critique towards the status quo (Calás & Smircich, 2006), formed to challenge the ways “patriarchal social formations such as hegemonic masculinities and neoliberal capitalism oppress and exploit” (Bell, Meriläinen, Taylor & Tienari, 2019, p.5). While feminism is probably most known for being a movement for equality, it has also given a new lens for theorizing and uncovering the way our academia and research can be biased to begin with.

Calás and Smircich (2006) dive into the impact feminist theorizing has had and continues to have on organizational studies in their article titled “From the ‘Woman’s Point of View’ Ten Years Later: Towards a Feminist Organization Studies.” They remind us that the “degree of critique and nature of politics” differ between feminist theories, resulting in different organizational applications. When it comes to feminist theorizing, it is in fact plural, including “complex body of theoretical perspectives” (Calás & Smircich, 2009 p.246).

The assumptions that the glass cliff phenomenon builds on, have their roots in the liberal feminist theory. The approach is intertwined with liberal political theories aspiring to reach equal opportunities with men, but “without radical transformation of the social and political system” (Gherardi, 2009, p. 216). According to Gherardi, historically the liberal theory strived towards equal presentation condemning sex discrimination but at the same time denying sex differences. She adds that the focus shifted during the 1990s from the affirmation of women as equally capable leaders to include the reverse aspects of the differences between the genders, but still accepting the seemingly “gender-neutral” epistemologies.

Leadership and organization studies were defined for a long period as “gender neutral” which in turn was interpreted as a true and objective way of theorizing. This assumption has been contested with research shedding light to the ways organizations and organization theory are gendered (Britton, 2000; Hearn, 2000), proposing that the lack of reference to gender does not mean neutrality. Calás and Smircich (2009) state that gender was introduced to organization studies in the 1970s in the form of a woman, and the focus on her subordinate relation to men presented the start of the women in leadership literature. This way, “exploring organizational cultures and their gendered nature means making them visible” (Aaltio-Marjosola & Mills, 2004, p.4), allowing us to examine this previously neglected aspect.

While the women in management aligns with the liberal theory and its notion of equal treatment, the possibly biased role of scholars as constructors of knowledge has presented a different direction for feminist theories. Calás and Smircich (1989, p.223) suggest that feminist scholarship can provide the lens through which academia can be rewritten “so that social and ethical consequences are explicitly addressed.” In regard to this, the authors add that the “women’s experience” approach is used to call attention to the different ways of thinking between genders, asserting the value of women’s differing way of constructing knowledge.

It seems appropriate to also mention that feminist theories do not restrict to white women. The intersectional theory (Crenshaw, 1991) proposes a cultural perspective, and tries to explain the ways “various matrices of oppression such as gender, race and class intersect” in experiences (Bell et al., 2019, p.7). Together with the transnational

approach of feminism that untangles the ways feminism should have border crossing effects (Mohanty, 2003), the aspects seek to broaden our perspectives. In their paper Bell, Meriläinen, Taylor and Tienari (2019) point to the ways feminist histories have been accused of being ‘whitewashed,’ and how they have sometimes ignored the complexity of the interplay of multiple realities at once. Nkomo and Ariss (2014) also bring out this aspect by analyzing the history of white privilege and in the way which everything is primarily compared to this norm. In the words of Audre Lorde (2007, p. 138), “there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle, because we do not lead single-issue lives.”

2.2 The history of women in leadership studies

Since the recognition of the importance of gender as an impactful factor in organization studies, the popularity of women in leadership studies has only been growing. Once questions about women’s abilities as leaders were made insignificant, research moved on to study the differences in leadership styles and effectiveness between men and women. Two meta-analyses show that early research on gender differences in leadership styles indicate that women in fact lead more democratically than men, rather than finding differences between interpersonally and task-oriented styles (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Van Engen & Willemsen, 2004). In recent years the focus has followed the trend of leadership theories, and interests have shifted to examine differences in transformational leadership. This type of leadership transforms followers in a way that they can “accomplish more than what is usually expected of them” (Northouse, 2013, p.185). Interestingly enough, women are seen to possess more transformational leadership abilities, that might even give them a leadership advantage (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & Van Engen, 2003).

The third aspect to research on women in leadership is the remaining underrepresentation of women in the very top positions of leadership. Powell and Graves (2003) use the leadership gap to illustrate vertical segregation in organizations, meaning how women leaders are disproportionately overrepresented in leadership positions at the lower levels of organizations. The most popular proposed explanations for the leadership gap have circulated around prejudice and discrimination, investment to human capital and gender differences (Hoyt, 2013 p.354). It is imperative to note,

that statistically women earn the same amount, if not more, of educational degrees (Hoyt, 2013, p.352), placing importance on other factors that can be considered to fall under the human capital category. This aspect regarding underrepresentation is also the premises to the glass cliff phenomenon, that provides insights to the remaining disappointing gender diversity at top positions by trying to understand and explain the situations where women do achieve high ranking leadership positions.

In addition to the vertically disproportional gender representation, the gender segregation can also be seen to be horizontal, when specific fields have become either male or female dominated. Related to this, Martin (2000) also reminds us of the “pink velvet ghetto phenomenon,” where women enter a profession in large numbers causing men to leave the profession and a subsequent drop in average pay and status. In addition to the leadership gap for women, the notorious gender pay gap also persists in the 21st century, with recent research suggesting that higher earning men are still far more reluctant to apply policies aiming to tackle the issue (Williams, 2021). It is safe to say that altogether there is still room for improvement regarding our understanding of these gendered differences in organizational life, again emphasizing the continuing importance of gendered organizational studies.

It is also worth mentioning, that when looking at the big picture women in leadership studies can be placed under a vaster entity: leadership diversity. Women are by far not the only discriminated or underrepresented group when it comes to organizational life, but research analyzing the effect of other diversity factors is far more neglected (Richardson & Loubier 2008). Studies on the glass cliff have tried to contribute also to this gap in leadership studies, studying the top promotions of minority leaders (see chapter 3.4).

3 THE GLASS CLIFF PHENOMENON

This chapter aims to unpack the academic research that has surfaced around the glass cliff phenomenon itself. The chapter starts with an analysis of the contradicting findings to build a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon's nature, then moves on to examine the factors contributing to the materialization of glass cliffs and how the phenomenon can be seen to extend to other minority groups. After this, the chapter ends by discussing the effects precarious appointments have for glass cliff leaders and how we can deal with the issues the phenomenon proposes.

3.1 Making sense of contradictory findings

Ryan and Haslam's original response to Judge in 2005 presented the start of the research into the phenomenon, providing initial evidence of the glass cliff within the business domain in the UK (Ryan & Haslam 2005). Since then, research has provided supporting replications also in the US Fortune 500 firms (Brady, Isaacs, Reeves, Burroway, & Reynolds, 2011) and, for example, in the legal (Ashby, Ryan & Haslam 2007) and political domains (Ryan, Haslam & Kulich, 2010). Research has also indicated that the phenomenon can be extended to include other minority groups (Cook & Glass, 2014a; Kulich, Ryan & Haslam, 2014).

Despite the substantial amount of supporting evidence, fully compiled research on the subject is far but exhaustive. Initial null results into the glass cliff have been presented by Adams, Gupta and Leeth (2009), when their archival study of US Fortune 500 companies found no support for the phenomenon among a large sample of chief executive officer appointments when using accountancy-based measures for indicating the riskiness and company performance. Similar results with no evidence of overrepresentation of women in positions related to previous bad company performance have been presented also from Canada (Carroll, Hennessey, & MacDonald, 2013) and the Netherlands (Santen & Donker, 2009).

Later on, Ryan and Haslam have stated that the aim of their paper in 2005 was to provide a direct response and not to "uncover a universal phenomenon" while pressing the notions of precariousness and risk when describing the phenomenon instead of

financial performance (Ryan & Haslam, 2009). They agree with Adams, Gupta and Leeth in the sense that glass cliffs are not common nor universal but argue that at the same time it cannot be said that they are rare. Ryan and Haslam also turn to another argument in favor of urging caution with the interpretation of null results. Since experimental studies where the risk of organizational failure has been manipulated have made clear the problem is very real when one goes beyond accountancy-based measures, the authors contest the conclusion made by Adams, Gupta and Leeth that above the glass ceiling the playing field for male and female leaders seems to be level (Ryan & Haslam, 2009).

The contradictory findings also inspired a study to examine the occurrence of the phenomenon when company performance was measured either with ‘subjective’ stock-market performance or ‘objective’ accountancy-based performance (Haslam, Ryan, Kulich, Trojanowski, & Atkins, 2010). Results in fact were in line with those of Adams, Gupta and Leeth, and there was no relationship between women’s presence on boards and ROA or ROE indicating declining performance. However, the glass cliff was evident when a negative relationship was discovered between women’s presence and the more ‘subjective’ stock-market performance. Haslam, Ryan, Kulich, Trojanowski and Atkins (2010) argue that companies with all male boards were also valued significantly higher than companies that had at least one woman on their board while ruling out other possible explaining factors. In addition, to support the phenomenon of the glass cliff, the authors find (interestingly enough) even stronger support for the argument that performance declines after the appointment. They conclude that the results might imply that glass cliffs are tied to perceptions about company performance, rather than “underlying financial realities” (Haslam et al., 2010, p.492). When women’s presence on boards is seen as a signal of decline, a drop in the confidence of investors is in turn reflected in following stock-market performance. This can cause the company to be seen to be in a crisis and subsequent glass cliff appointments tie up the circle that upholds and strengthens the phenomenon (Haslam et al., 2010, figure 2).

At the same time, we must take into account the fact that not even close to all studies have documented declining performance after the appointment of a woman, and investor’s lack of faith on appointed women cannot be seen as the sole explanator of

the phenomenon, but a possible pitfall nonetheless. For example, in their original paper Ryan and Haslam (2005) argue that after the appointments of women, the previously bad performance actually improved after a woman was appointed in unsure times. It should also be considered that other measures of crisis, for example social or psychological factors, can be read to identify positions as precarious (Ryan & Haslam, 2009). This way a glass cliff emerging in a financial upturn is not ruled out, nor is financial poor performance always present when a glass cliff occurs.

The very context dependent nature of the glass cliff is the quality that categorizes it as more of a phenomenon than a theory. Going over previous research Ryan, Haslam, Morgenroth, Rink, Stoker and Peters (2016) conclude that indeed though the glass cliff is not always apparent when looking at financial data, a clear pattern can be seen through other measures of crisis. They argue that the glass cliff is “a phenomenon that is whether observed or not, rather than proved or disproved” (Ryan et al., 2016, p.449) and that contradicting evidence serves a purpose in understanding the surroundings where glass cliffs do occur.

3.2 Underlying processes and moderating factors

When it comes to explaining the phenomenon, we must prepare ourselves to face another equivocal answer. The first experimental research into the phenomenon was able to prove a preference for a woman leader in crisis situations under laboratory conditions, and in addition indicated that the preference was mediated by the belief that the particular position is more stressful (Haslam & Ryan, 2008). The authors conclude that this could be either due to the beliefs that women possess traits more suitable for crisis management or that women are seen as more expendable. Their research also indicated that precarious positions are seen as better opportunities for women, perhaps illustrating how it is accepted that women do have a harder time trying to fight their way to reach top leadership positions.

Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2010) presented the first experimental demonstration of eliminating the effect with a history of female leadership. Their two experimental studies provided a replication of the glass cliff effect in controlled settings; there was a preference for a female leader in an organizational crisis situation, but only in a

scenario where the company had male dominant leadership history. The authors explored two possible explanations for this: a desire to maintain the status-quo and stereotypes about gender and leadership. When the study turned to examine the scenario where the company had previously had female leaders, there was no similar pattern of a preference for a male leader in a time of crisis. This way the authors conclude that the phenomenon is at least in part intertwined with “top management positions being primarily held by men” (Bruckmüller and Branscombe, 2010, p.438) and the subsequent association of maleness and leadership rather than the need to change things up in hopes to turn the crisis situation around or the desire to maintain the status-quo.

Stereotypes related to gender and leadership indeed have been a part of discourse when it comes to explaining the phenomenon. The “think manager think male” association (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Schein, 1973; Schein, Mueller, Lituchy, & Liu, 1996) has been used to (at least partially) explain many of the barriers women leaders face in general, when our ideas about what it means to be a leader differ from the traits of women leaders (Ryan et al., 2011). A more recent study also investigated a reverse association of “think follower, think female” (Braun, Stegmann, Hernandez Bark, Junker & van Dick, 2017), that might help explain the small number of women in top leadership positions. The authors speculate, that due to stereotypes we see women as better followers and subsequently push men towards leadership positions.

When it comes to the glass cliff phenomenon and explaining the preference for a female leader in times of crisis, Ryan, Haslam, Hersby and Bongiorno (2011, p.481) suggest that in light of the association between feminine characteristics and crisis management, we might in unsure times “think crisis, think female.” However, in their conclusion they practice caution with the interpretation of the association as a “positive shift toward the acknowledgement of women’s leadership ability” (Ryan et al., 2011, p.481). When the authors analyzed the reasons why the “think crisis, think female” association applies in precarious organizational contexts, they found it to only apply in situations where the leader was expected to take a “passive” and “career-damaging” role. In contrast, when the leader was expected to take on a more active role and “improve company performance or to be a spokesperson for the company” (Ryan et al., 2011, p.481), both masculine and feminine traits were seen as fitting. This way the

authors conclude that the association is quite dependent on “specific managerial expectations” (Ryan et al., 2011, p.481). Along the same lines Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2010) found experimental support for the association, when in their second study participants chose the female candidate in crisis context, at least in part because she was described to be more stereotypically feminine. Further research into the association also indicates that stereotypically masculine role models and sexism may make it less likely to “think crisis, think female,” and that in situations where the “think manager, think male” mindset and sexism are low, candidates with gendered, feminine traits are chosen regardless of their sex (Gartzia, Ryan, Balluerka, & Aritzeta, 2012).

While Bruckmüller and Branscombe’s study in 2010 indicated that the status-quo bias is less likely to explain the phenomenon than stereotypes about gender and leadership, their argument has been contested and the “signaling for change” explanation has gotten support from experimental studies as well (Brown, Diekmann, & Schneider, 2011; Lee & James, 2007). As a matter of fact, another study produced completely contradicting conclusions suggesting that “the female candidate's potential to signal change, rather than her quality and suitability as a leader” was behind the preference (Kulich, Lorenzi-Cioldi, Iacoviello, Faniko, & Ryan, 2015). The authors suggest that non-traditional leaders are an active, strategic choice for companies to signal change when past leadership has failed. Nevertheless, it is notable that the study also indicates, that the non-traditional leaders are not actually expected to make a difference, perhaps suggesting that glass cliffs leaders are simply valued for their use in signaling change rather than building actual change and improvement.

Previously presented explanations for the phenomenon in this thesis relate to decision making in the promotion of glass cliff leaders, but we must also consider the possibility that women seek out these challenges themselves. When it comes to women’s own preferences, it might be that women enjoy challenging positions, or simply that fewer opportunities make women more willing to accept more precarious leadership positions (Ryan et al., 2016). A study from Australia sheds light on this matter when women were found to believe that a successful history of navigating risky assignments actually was the reason behind their career advancement (Fitzsimmons, Callan, & Paulsen, 2014). Similarly, another study found women to find risky leadership

positions as less attractive than men while women were also less likely to say that they would accept such positions (Rink, Ryan, & Stoker, 2012). When tackling this paradox of women being more risk averse but ending up in more often in risky positions than men, Darouei and Pluut (2018, p.418) conclude this to be due to the “external career barriers that women still face.” Still there is evidence that women do play an active role when it comes to filling risky leadership positions, but at the same time one must consider what women’s reasons for seeking out these positions tell us about the (perhaps not so) equal availability of opportunities (Glass & Cook, 2016).

Another factor found to play a role when it comes to glass cliffs, is the perceived availability or lack of support and resources. In addition to the arguments made by Haslam, Ryan, Kulich, Trojanowski and Atkins (2010) about investors’ perceptions and lack of faith as one possible explanator for the phenomenon, two experimental studies find support for this aspect (Rink, Ryan, & Stoker, 2013). Their results suggest that women were seen as better crisis leaders in scenarios where they had to navigate the crisis without being able to rely on support or proper resources. The study also indicated that the reason for this preference was the belief that women would have a better chance “establishing acceptance” among the employees and the whole organization (Rink et al., 2013, p.385).

Given the complex nature of the phenomenon, it is not reasonable to assume for glass cliffs to emerge from a single cause. We must remember that the reasons are not always mutually exclusive, nor are all the factors that can play a role always present when the phenomenon materializes.

3.3 Glass cliffs for minorities

Since women are not the only “other” that is still seen as an exception than the norm when it comes to top leadership positions, it is no surprise that researchers have been interested with the relation the phenomenon has with other minority groups. Cook and Glass (2014b) were among the first to explore this aspect, and contrary to their hypothesis they found support for the “bold moves” theory, where minorities are more likely to get promoted in strongly performing firms, rather than weakly performing ones (glass cliffs). It is noteworthy though, that this study used objective accountancy-

based measures for performance, that have previously shown to not always correlate with the manifestation of the phenomenon (see chapter 3.1). In fact, another study conducted within the same year, again with accountancy-based measures, did find support for the glass cliff phenomenon among minority chief executive officer appointments (Cook & Glass, 2014a).

In addition to analysis of the business world, minority glass cliffs have been explored in politics and sports. An archival study of the UK general elections indicated that the fact that members of ethnic minority groups were less successful than white counterparts can be explained by the lower winnability of the seats they were set out to compete for (Kulich et al., 2014). This way minority members are preferentially selected to contest harder-to-win seats, resulting in their poorer success in elections and underrepresentation at the top. Similarly, a study analyzing coaching transitions in men's basketball found that the glass cliff phenomenon was present when minority coaches were more likely to get promoted to head coach of losing teams (Cook & Glass, 2013). In accordance with previous research, when looking beyond financial data it can be concluded that minorities are more likely to face more precarious leadership positions, indicating that the phenomenon extends to minority groups.

The studies focusing on minority leaders that manage to get to top positions have also observed the post promotion trajectories of leaders in more detail. In their analysis of promotions in men's basketball, Cook and Glass (2013) found minority leaders that were unable to "generate winning records" to be replaced by white successors. They call this phenomenon the "savior effect," and argue this to be a manifestation of the "significant obstacles minority leaders face post promotion" (Cook & Glass, 2013, p.182), including greater scrutiny and challenges to authority. Another study extended this phenomenon also to include all occupational minorities, indicating that the case is the same for women (Cook & Glass, 2014a).

Taken together, research including the aspects of minority groups is very scarce. With research implying that there are vast differences between these different occupational minorities when it comes to leadership (Bell, & Nkomo, 2003), Cook and Glass (2014a) remind us that the differences between white women, minority men and minority women within the glass cliff context is worth examining more closely.

3.4 Consequences of precarious appointments

If women and/or other minorities are in fact in some situations preferentially selected for more risky leadership positions, it is important also to look at the consequences these glass cliff leaders are disproportionately exposed to. Leadership failure has a tendency to lead to public scrutiny and pressure from both the media as well as the stakeholders (Boin, Hart, McConnell, & Preston, 2010). When looking at the big picture, research suggests that unsuccessful leaders are less likely to be appointed to new leadership positions regardless of their gender or ethnicity (Ferris, Jagannathan, & Pritchard, 2003) and that “observers” have the tendency to blame leaders for organizational failure rather than situational factors (Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985; Meindl, 1995). It can be said that crisis leaders in general can face a lot of uncertainty and turbulence in their position, when high leadership turnover can be linked with organizations experiencing crisis (Pearson & Clair, 1998) and more recent research even encourage making changes in management when performance is low (Boyne, James, John, & Petrovsky, 2011). On top of this, non-traditional leaders face more scrutiny and blame for mistakes than traditional leaders (Brescoll, Dawson, & Uhlmann, 2010), again indicating that the playing field is not level for non-traditional leaders trying to get into the boardrooms that statistically are still dominated by white men. In conclusion, there is already much pressure on leaders to generate organizational success at the cost of their own credibility, status, and career and therefore it is unnecessary to make it any harder for non-traditional leaders than it already is by preferentially selecting them for risky positions.

Having established that leadership positions are not the most stable roles to begin with, navigating a glass cliff, a leadership position associated with an even higher risk and precariousness, naturally brings along a subsequently higher risk of failing and having to deal with all the negative implications leaders of unsuccessful organizations must face. The negative implications present in glass cliff situations have been further investigated by examining career trajectories more closely. While observing occupational minority chief executive officers (defined as white women and men and women of color in their study) Cook and Glass (2014a) found a pattern of them being replaced with a white male leader, especially if they were unsuccessful in turning around the crisis situation. The authors argue that occupational minority leaders might

not be given the proper time, support, or resources to be able to change the course of events, just to be replaced by an “organizational savior.” The evidence regarding the role of insufficient support and resources associated with the phenomenon could be seen to align with this argument.

The consequences of glass cliff positions have been explored also in the form of position tenure. When looking into the service periods of UK based companies’ directors, Main and Gregory-Smith (2018) come to the conclusion that women enjoy shorter tenures than their male colleagues. The authors find women directors to face high risk of dismissal after 9 years of service, implying that women are used as a symbol of independence. However, a study examining the tenure of 193 female chief executive officers in the North America found contradicting results (Elsaid & Ursel, 2018). In their survival analysis covering years 1992 to 2014 women chief executive officers were found to be “40% less likely to face turnover at any point after appointment than male chief executive officers” (Elsaid & Ursel, 2018, p.156). Remarkable is that the authors find initial evidence for this result to be a consequence of the companies’ reluctance to let go of highly visible female employees, chief executive officers, in a fear of negative publicity. At the same time, another study including *all* women who have ever served as chief executive officers of Fortune 500 over the years indicated that women did have shorter tenures than their male counterparts (Glass & Cook, 2016). This might be a reflection of the more visible position gender equality issues have enjoyed in more recent years.

When it comes to navigating gendered expectations of leadership, another interesting approach has been brought forward by Ellemers, Rink, Derks and Ryan (2012), linking together the “queen bee effect” and glass cliff effects that together lead to the “decreased career opportunities” for both individual women and women as a group. According to the authors, the queen bee effect portrays the way individual women feel the need to distinguish themselves from other women and dismiss their gender identity in order to succeed – a process that can harm perceptions of women’s leadership abilities as a group. They argue that the glass cliffs can be seen as a type of reverse effect for the queen bee effect, when women who identify more strongly with gender identity and tend to be more easily associated to women as a group, face the glass cliff effect which in turn harms individual careers.

It can be concluded that glass cliff leaders are more likely to face negative implications for their future career possibilities due to their preferential selection for precarious positions. Therefore, the overrepresentation of women or members other minorities for such positions is problematic and the subject deserves our attention. When occupational minorities are preferentially selected for positions that affect their reputation and careers negatively resulting in lower success compared to men colleagues, we run the risk of strengthening stereotypes about the lacking abilities and unsuitability of these minorities when it comes to top leadership positions (Ryan et al., 2016).

3.5 Preventing glass cliffs

While academic, more objective insights into the phenomenon are a necessity when it comes to building an inclusive picture of our practices, people's feelings and attitudes (whether correct or not) play a key role when trying to build change. The first look behind the curtains was done by Ryan, Haslam and Postmes (2007) by examining people's reactions to reading about the phenomenon. In this study respondents told their thoughts on the phenomenon after reading an article about glass cliff research, and results showed women to give "more pernicious explanations" ranging from sexism to stereotypes, while men preferred "more benign" answers like strategic decisions. Another interesting discovery was the fact that respondents' seniority effected the observed gender differences, with the most senior level female respondents providing very similar answers as their male counter partners favoring benign explanations or even denial (Ryan et al., 2007). The findings are in accordance with research suggesting that women reaching positions in high office tend to be similar to their male colleagues (Derks, Ellemers, van Laar & de Groot, 2011).

It can be said that research has later on provided far more insights on factors that unlikely play a key role on the manifestation of the phenomenon, also ruling out many of the ideas provided by Ryan, Haslam and Postmes's respondents (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010). We must keep in mind that perceptions indeed can differ greatly from "objective reality," but nevertheless play an important role when trying to shape real organizational life and prevent glass cliffs from occurring. In this sense, the perhaps most noteworthy finding of Ryan, Haslam and Postmes's study of people's

reactions towards the phenomenon in 2007 were the huge gender differences in respondent's attitudes towards the glass cliff phenomenon. In fact, over 50% of the male respondents questioned its very existence.

Considering the high numbers indicating denial and the coping mechanisms where women internalize these biased assumptions and feel like they have to strive to become more like their male colleagues to be able to succeed, it seems appropriate to question existing social structures and assumptions at play in our organizational everyday life. Perhaps the solution lies in changing these gendered beliefs about leadership that seem to drive women to either try to separate themselves from other women in order to succeed or take the risk of ending up on a glass cliff. This is undeniably not an easy task and there are no easy-fix tools to actually change beliefs and assumptions that have such strong roots in our history and culture. This requires persistent and patient work.

Addressing the issue in academia provides a place for building the necessary understanding of the phenomenon and hopefully inspires collective motivation for change and finding effective solutions for prevailing problems. As Ryan, Haslam, Hersby and Bongiorno (2011, p.481) state, we still have "some way to go before the typical manager is not seen in gendered terms," but research is the first, essential step towards practical change. So, we shall continue to contest the denial and deepen our understanding towards these issues by providing academic evidence.

It should be stated too, that the present is not without any legislation regarding leadership diversity. Different quotas have been at least one way to regulate the presentation of occupational minorities. For example, in the UK political sphere the Labor Party has successfully tackled the issue of women facing harder-to-win seats than their counter partners, and by "affirmative action programs" they were able to eliminate the glass cliff effect for women (Ryan et al., 2010). The Labor party's policy is a great example of acknowledging the issue, understanding and accepting it, and finally making an effective legislative ruling to ensure equal treatment and opportunity.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this thesis was to build a coherent and collective picture of the current understanding of the glass cliff phenomenon and bring forward its role in the remaining underrepresentation of women in top leadership positions. This chapter includes concluding comments, answers for the research questions of the literature review and addresses limitations and recommendations.

4.1 Concluding comments

In the end of 2019 news domains were flooded with articles about the youngest ever female Prime Minister, Sanna Marin and her cabinet led by women. A year later the media celebrated another great accomplishment when Kamala Harris secured her position as the first woman and woman of color to serve as Vice President of the United States. The fact that these promotions are still seen as exceptional reflects our still prevailing “malestream” trend at the very top echelons of organizational life. Although it is worthy to celebrate women in high offices, we should not forget to turn our attention to the contextual factors at play as well. For example, the second female Prime Minister Theresa May in the UK was elected after previous Prime Minister David Cameron could not handle the pressure after dividing the country by setting the “Brexit vote.” There is also contrast in the way Theresa May faced continuous, public scrutiny whereas the current Prime Minister Boris Johnson has enjoyed much more empathy and understanding when tackling the politics.

While altogether there has been impressive improvement when it comes to gender diversity in leadership, this is not the time to stop. It might feel excessive or immoderate to question the promotions of women to leadership positions, after all is that not that a sign of improving gender equality? The reasons behind the phenomenon also do not indicate that women are being set up to fail only out of blind hatred or oppression, so it might feel like a “natural” state of things if the phenomenon can be explained by more suitable and “inherent” leadership abilities in crisis for example. However, we cannot ignore the very fact that by preferring occupational minorities like women in precarious situations for whatever reasons, they unavoidably face more challenges when building careers and slimmer chances of succeeding that can possibly

result in shorter employment tenures and increased vulnerability towards the scrutiny and pressure failing leaders face. That risk should at least be acknowledged compensated for.

Experimental demonstrations have proved the phenomenon to have a strong and consistent hold on our organizational life, but it is far from common, universal, or univocal. Reasons behind the phenomenon are manifold but not mutually exclusive, and where in one situation other factors can be identified to explain the manifestation of a glass cliff, they might not be all present when looking at the next one. The phenomenon's multiply determined nature just adds to the complexity. Precarious leadership positions can be determined in many ways, not just financially, making the navigation of the phenomenon difficult.

While it is great that we have acknowledged women's abilities as successful crisis leaders, when looking behind the assumptions that make us feel this way, the problems are evident. Both the explanations regarding women's better suited abilities and the signaling change approach might not seem so problematic at the first glance. Still, with the evidence suggesting we associate women's good crisis management skills only with scenarios where there is a need for a passive scapegoat rather than an active change maker who is actually expected to turn the poor performance around (Kulich et al., 2015; Ryan et al., 2011), we can see how the glass cliff appointments cause harm for occupational minorities' careers. While these stereotypes and assumptions that drive our actions hardly are intentional, it is our responsibility to reflect on the consequences they result in and strive for more equal practices. With more close examination we can indeed see the ways the preference subtly hides the fact that by exposing women and other minorities to positions with more negative consequences, it plays a part in the remaining underrepresentation of women and other minorities in top positions.

The glass cliff literature represents well how merely having diverse leadership does not guarantee equal opportunities. While examining the interplay of identity, the queen bee and glass cliff effects, Ellemers, Rink, Derks and Ryan (2012, p.180-181) conclude that "simply having women in high places while continuing to endorse and communicate gendered leadership expectations is of no benefit to the organization or

to these women.” While the most visible and (rightfully) celebrated aspect seems to be the rising numbers of women and minority leaders in high office, we have run into another wall when blindly taking this to mean that equality in organizational practices has been achieved. Understanding the glass cliff phenomenon and the consequences advances the acknowledgement and acceptance of the remaining barriers non-traditional leaders face. This in turn enables us to take action and to building mutually beneficial and truly equal leadership diversity.

4.2 Answering the research questions

Next, concluding remarks for the research questions presented in the beginning of this thesis are given.

1. What factors have been identified to underlie the manifestation of glass cliffs?

The most documented factors underlying the phenomenon seem to be stereotypes about gender and leadership, strategic need for change and women’s own choices. However, the nature of crisis and managerial expectations also effect the types of crisis situations where we make these stereotypical associations leading to glass cliff appointments. In addition to these, the availability of support and resources can play a role in defining a glass cliff position.

2. What practical implications precarious appointments have for glass cliff leaders’ careers?

Precarious appointments disproportionately expose occupational minority leaders to the negative consequences that unsuccessful leaders must endure personally. Due to the highly visible and public nature of leadership positions, the negative consequences often are very remarkable for individual leaders carrying responsibility of the whole organization. Initial evidence suggests that glass cliff leaders might also enjoy shorter tenures than their colleagues. The selection of occupational minorities for precarious positions without the time or resources needed to navigate the situation not only structurally makes it harder for them to succeed but strengthens our stereotypes about gender and leadership that underlie the preference to begin with.

4.3 Limitations and recommendations

As with any academic publications, it is also important to reflect critically on our own work. When it comes to the glass cliff literature, it is notable that the strain of studies on the subject is somewhat narrow and there is a rather limited group of scholars that have explored the subject in depth. This thesis relies strongly on their discoveries and arguments as well, and it should be said that with this comes a risk of missing other points of view.

A great amount of the research also reflects on the realities of the Global North, limiting our perspective on the phenomenon in its own way. Hoyt (2013, p.365) reminds us, that taken together the even the research considering gender in leadership is very Western, and we must keep in mind that conclusions made up on assumptions and observations in one culture might not be applicable to another. In fact, a recent study with a cultural perspective concluded that while (similarly to Western observations) there was a preference for a male leader in good times, in Turkish context there was no evidence for a preference for female leaders in times of poor performance (Yildiz & Vural, 2019). As I have noted previously, also the research including the possibly differing realities for other minority groups besides women regarding the phenomenon still has room for improvement.

Another great point that I want to address is the neglect of the male perspective on the phenomenon. While feminist theories have aspired to make gender a visible factor within theoretical contexts, we have to face the fact that most research has focused on issues relating to the female gender. Wiesner-Hanks (2001, p.89-92) points out, that by accepting the male as the “default” gender we are in turn also neglecting the research on phenomena primarily concerning the male gender. The same perspective can be applied when studying the effects of the glass cliff. Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2010, p.448). have also reminded us of this perspective, addressing the importance of examining “the higher selection of men in times of success to fully understand the phenomenon.”

Since perceptions and stereotypes are strongly linked to the glass cliff phenomenon, I would find it interesting to explore if and to what extent the undeniably rising numbers

of women in high office (in precarious positions or not) will in the future help speed up the change in our assumptions about leadership and gender. Although the phenomenon is not only about single cases, it would seem logical that successful women leaders will act as role models also for young women, making the idea of striving for these positions feel more at reach. As mentioned before, women in top positions are more likely to be similar as their male colleagues (Derks et al., 2011), and with rising diversity it would be interesting for example to use this aspect as a proxy to monitor change in assumptions and perceptions about non-traditional leaders. Will the statistical diversity that does not in itself guarantee equal opportunities result in strengthening the stereotypes related to women leaders that cause the different access to safer leadership positions, or could it still help open minds towards changing gendered beliefs and help us avoid the preference of non-traditional leaders for precarious positions?

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